

**Remarks by Mrs. Laura Bush**  
**UNESCO International Literacy Day**  
**Tuesday, September 8, 2009**

Thank you, Director-General Matsuura, for your kind introduction. Thank you for everything you do for education worldwide – and for your commitment to literacy. During your time as UNESCO's Director-General you have truly led by example and we applaud you.

Thanks to everyone here for your warm welcome. I am happy to join you today and to celebrate International Literacy Day. This is my fifth visit to UNESCO. My first visit, though, was certainly the most memorable. When President Bush announced that the United States would rejoin UNESCO, I was fortunate to lead the first U.S. delegation to the 2003 UNESCO General Conference. It was a proud day for the United States – and for me, as I raised the American flag. For the first time in nearly twenty years, the stars and stripes of the United States waved alongside the flags from around the world. Since then, I have enjoyed visiting several times as Honorary Ambassador for the Literacy Decade.

Now that George and I have moved back to Texas from the White House, I thought you might be interested to know about some of the members of my family. My father-in-law, President George H. W. Bush, just celebrated his 85th birthday – complete with his traditional skydiving jump from an airplane. This summer he jumped into the largest space in Kennebunkport, Maine – a church parking lot. My mother-in-law, Barbara Bush joked that it was a convenient place to land – if anything went wrong we could wheel him straight into the church for the memorial service. As you can tell from her jokes, Barbara Bush is in fine health and still going strong. She continues to

work with literacy providers in the United States through her Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

Our daughters are doing well. Jenna and Henry are happily married, she's teaching school and she found out that her book, Ana's Story, which she wrote with UNICEF has been nominated for a Youth Award at the Frankfurt, Germany book festival in the fall.

Barbara has founded an NGO called Global Health Corps that places recent college graduates in health clinics for the poor around the world. You can learn more about it on the web at [www.ghcorps.org](http://www.ghcorps.org).

George and I are proud of the work our girls are doing. And we are happy to be home in Texas. We're busy writing our memoirs and planning the Bush Presidential Center at Southern Methodist University.

As I've been working on my memoir, I've thought a lot about many of the experiences that shaped my commitment to education and literacy. My mother loved to read, and she read to me often when I was growing up. My school teachers inspired me to choose a career as a teacher. My college literature classes furthered my love of books and reading. From my earliest days teaching in Texas to the classrooms I visited around the world – my experiences have reinforced my belief that education is our most urgent priority. And it should have the highest call on our time and resources.

Learning to read is fundamental for all education. That's why I am pleased to congratulate the 2009 recipients of UNESCO's King Sejong [Say-jong] and Confucius Literacy Prizes. Congratulations to each of you. And thank you for your good work!

International Literacy Day is a fitting occasion to recognize these prize-winners. UNESCO first proclaimed September 8<sup>th</sup> International Literacy Day in 1965. It was first celebrated in 1966 and over the last forty-three years, International Literacy Day has reminded people everywhere of the importance of learning to read.

Literacy is at the core of sustainable solutions to the world's greatest challenges. It provides the foundation for freedom and sustainable economic development. And literacy empowers men and women to transform their own lives and the world around them.

Learning to read empowers parents to transform their families. When parents learn to read, they teach their children, and they are more likely to be advocates for their children's education. And research shows that educated women raise healthier families.

Literacy empowers citizens to transform their health. People who can read can understand the label on a food container. They know how to follow the instructions on a medicine bottle. And they are more likely to know how diseases like HIV and malaria are transmitted, so they can make informed decisions that will keep themselves and their families safe.

Literacy empowers people to transform their communities. When citizens learn to read, they're more likely to participate in business and trade, which leads to greater economic development. Literacy enables men and women to ask questions, to understand their rights, and to participate in their government.

Despite the clear evidence of the value of literacy, more than 775 million adults remain illiterate and 75 million children remain out of school, risking the same fate. Helping each one of these men, women, and children learn to read is our moral obligation and one of the greatest challenges of our time.

Today as we celebrate the transformative power of literacy, we must recommit to the urgent work of extending literacy to all.

In 2003, UNESCO launched the Literacy Decade to ensure that every person in every nation would acquire literacy skills that are vital to their ability to participate fully in society. Since then, we've taken steps to engage all nations in this important work. During the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2006, I hosted the White House Global Literacy Conference to emphasize the need for sustained global and country-level leadership to address the issue of illiteracy. We were joined by more than 50 spouses of world leaders and many more education ministers from around the world. At the conference, and two similar White House Global Literacy Summits in 2007 and 2008, we discussed what nations are doing to address illiteracy, and which programs can be replicated worldwide.

The White House Conference was followed by six regional literacy conferences in Qatar, China, Mali, India, Azerbaijan, and Mexico. Each gathering encouraged neighboring nations to collaborate and share proven strategies for addressing illiteracy. Individuals from three of today's prize-winning programs, from Burkina Faso, India, and the Philippines, spoke at these regional conferences and reported on successful literacy programs in their countries.

UNESCO has sought concrete outcomes which demonstrate progress. In countries where illiteracy rates are the highest, UNESCO's Learning Initiative for Empowerment, or LIFE program is building government capacity to design and implement national literacy plans.

The Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Program, LAMP, has helped measure our progress and identify needs in the initial 5 pilot countries of El Salvador, Mongolia, Morocco, Niger and the Palestinian territories. Three additional countries - Jordan, Namibia, and Vietnam – have begun LAMP as well. By gaining a more complete assessment of literacy levels, countries and donors can better prioritize our efforts. As we do, it's clear that we must increase our investment in literacy for all.

Last fall I announced the establishment of the United Nations Literacy Decade Fund to Advance Global Literacy. This Fund, which is housed in UNESCO, supports projects that further the goals of the Literacy Decade. Support from the Fund will target the most disadvantaged populations and countries with the lowest literacy rates.

The UNLD Fund to Advance Global Literacy enables all UNESCO partners to make sure we have the resources necessary to be successful in our efforts to end illiteracy. Last year, the United States was the first donor to the Fund, contributing more than \$2.5 million dollars. As we approach the end of the Literacy Decade, I urge other governments, foundations, businesses, and literacy advocates to join us in this partnership.

We are making strides in extending literacy around the world but the recent *Education for All* Global Monitoring Review showed that much work remains. The pace of our progress may not be fast enough to meet our goal of cutting illiteracy rates in half by 2015.

As we look ahead to the final years of the Literacy Decade, we must intensify our commitment to ensuring that every man, woman, and child can read. As we recognize and replicate successful efforts, we must also seek new solutions. Together we can forge new partnerships to promote literacy for all.

One way is by reaching out to young people and tapping into their creativity to solve global problems. The UNESCO Laura W. Bush Travelling Fellowship is a partnership with American universities which is giving the next generation of social entrepreneurs the chance to put their ideas into action.

Thanks to Stan Wang, one of the Laura W. Bush Fellows, hygiene education is transforming the health of a rural village in Ghana. Stan designed and implemented a successful pilot program which teaches the importance of hand washing. Villagers are now better educated about the simple steps they can take to prevent infection and disease.

Another fellow, Thao Nguyen [Tao When] spent six weeks working to transform the destinies of young women in Cambodia through English language education. In a city well-known for human trafficking, her efforts demonstrate the empowering role of education for preventing trafficking and reintegrating trafficked women into society.

The stories of these Travelling Fellows underscore how individual efforts can enhance international programs to promote global literacy. Nations from every region are pursuing strategies that make literacy education relevant to

people's daily lives. Each of us – locally, nationally, and internationally – must seize opportunities to ensure that literacy remains a priority.

Achieving the goal of global literacy requires global participation. It requires continued global leadership at every level – from international organizations like UNESCO to political leadership in each nation, from private corporations to public educators, and from local literacy centers to moms and dads in every home.

I have seen the hope that literacy brings to people around the world and I applaud each of today's prize-winners for your commitment to literacy. Your example inspires all of us.

Thanks to each of you for you do to extend the transformative power of literacy to people everywhere. Today, we must renew our commitment to the urgent work of literacy for all.

Thank you.